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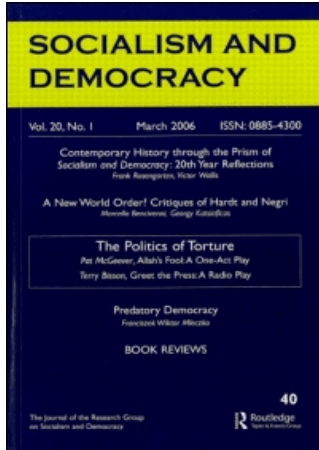
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*The Radicalism of Randolph Bourne**

Christopher Phelps

“At twenty-five,” wrote Randolph Bourne in 1913, “I find myself full of the wildest radicalism, and look with dismay at my childhood friends who are already settled down, and have achieved babies and responsibilities.”¹ In the seven remaining years of his brief life, Bourne’s refusal to reconcile himself to convention or existing society, his “wildest radicalism,” only deepened. As he steadfastly opposed an immensely destructive war whose futility had not yet registered in Americans’ minds, and which most other American intellectuals embraced unreservedly, Bourne’s alienation from the established classes became ever more pronounced, as did his longings for radical social transformation. His most famous refrain, “War is the health of the State,” meant in Bourne’s words that “We cannot crusade against war without crusading implicitly against the State,” for war and state “are inseparably and functionally joined.”²

Nevertheless, the radicalism of Randolph Bourne (1886–1918), a student of the philosopher John Dewey who breathed life into Greenwich Village in its bohemian heyday, has often been interpreted as cultural, not political. In the 1940s, Louis Filler wrote that Bourne was “emphatically not political-minded in the strictest sense of the word” but rather a thinker whose “concern was with the American psyche and its moral and cultural manifestations.” Max Lerner, likewise, described Bourne as “a sort of amateur at political theory.”³ Attempts to view Bourne as a cultural as opposed to a political thinker have been issued in many idioms since – most recently, the postmodern. The reasons for making this distinction between Bourne’s cultural philosophy and his political judgments have varied

*This essay was originally presented as a paper at the conference “Randolph Bourne’s America,” Columbia University, October 11, 2004.

1. As quoted in Louis Filler, *Randolph Bourne* (1943; New York: Citadel, 1966), 28.
2. Randolph Bourne, “The State,” in *War and the Intellectuals*, ed. Carl Resek (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 80.
3. Filler, 29; and Lerner, introduction to Filler, vii.

greatly. For mid-century left-liberals like Lerner and Fuller, Bourne was attractive in many ways but needed to be shorn of his most extreme leftism. Postmodernist admirers of his thought today, by contrast, exaggerate irrationalist elements in Bourne and celebrate an extreme cultural radicalism as the most radical form of intellectual activity imaginable. For that reason they are keen to downplay the political radicalism equally implicit in Bourne's writing, which they view as conventional and outmoded.⁴

Bourne *was* a moral and cultural radical, to be sure. In the era when intellectual production centered on "little magazines," he and his circle inveighed against sterility in education, the embalmed canon of a "genteel tradition" in letters, and the puritanical and Calvinistic strictures of Victorian culture. Bourne characterized himself as a "literary radical," and his affection for Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau resonated in the cadences of his prose. Despondent about American shallowness, complacency, and conformity, he touted, in his most heartfelt personal expressions, the romantic ideals of "youth" and "life" as vital resources for the regeneration of democracy.

But Bourne advocated the "wildest radicalism" in political, social, and economic matters as well. The manifestly cultural features of Bourne's writing and politics should not be used to obscure his deliberate political engagement. Even in a period when the initiative lay with the proponents of change – liberal progressive reformers, woman suffrage activists, middle-class peace advocates, and the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs – Bourne came to occupy the most left-lying vantage point existent: a revolutionary and socialist politics centered upon the liberation of labor, in perpetual search of the abolition of state and class.⁵

As a student at Columbia University, Bourne took part in the Intercollegiate Socialist Society. His prize-winning undergraduate essay "The Doctrine of the Rights of Man as Formulated by Thomas Paine" hailed "modern dynamic Socialism" with its "applied scientific

4. See, for example, Ross Posnock, "The Politics of Nonidentity: A Genealogy," *Boundary 2*, vol. 19 (1992), and Leslie J. Vaughan, *Randolph Bourne and the Politics of Cultural Radicalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997). The best treatment of the cultural criticism of Bourne, one that does not suppress its political dimensions, is Casey Blake, *Beloved Community: The Cultural Criticism of Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

5. State and class were closely identified in the social thought of Bourne, who held a class theory of the state's origins and utility; see in particular "The State" (note 2), 90–91, 92.

ethics" of social justice and economic democracy.⁶ For his graduate studies in 1912–1913, Bourne turned to the faculty of political science with a major in sociology, having concluded that he needed the foundation in history and philosophy they would provide since these were "intellectual arenas of which the literary professors seemed scandalously ignorant."⁷ During that year, Bourne roomed with Harry Chase. Like Bourne, Chase had arrived at college relatively late, in his case because of years spent as business editor of the *Daily People*, the organ of Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party.⁸

Before the cultural concept of the "transnational" became cardinal in Bourne's writing, it characterized his own political development. His European travels of 1913 and 1914 helped him refine his socialist understanding. Bourne was to have been a delegate to the international socialist congress in Vienna in 1914, but the storm clouds of the coming First World War upset that plan. Nevertheless, while in England he met Fabian gradualists and enjoyed talking with them, though he found their confidence inadequate to a world he thought was changing all too slowly. He professed that he would "welcome any aggressive blow, any sign of impatience with the salvation of society by our self-appointed leaders of church and state." Seeing the rigidities of the British class structure, wrote Bourne, had "immensely strengthened my radicalism." In Italy, Bourne was stirred by a three-day general strike: "The overwhelming expression of social solidarity displayed . . . made one realize that here were radical classes that had the courage of their convictions." In Paris, likewise, a friend reported that Bourne could be found reading "an extreme socialist newspaper, *La Bataille Syndicaliste*."⁹

Bourne's sympathy for revolutionary approaches and syndicalism was even more obvious in his support for the Industrial Workers of the World, a revolutionary trade union movement comprised primarily of unskilled immigrant workers – the most lowly, despised, feared organization in the America of its time. Bourne attended the Madison Square Garden pageant orchestrated by John Reed and others in 1913 in support of the Paterson strikers, and that year he wrote a poem, "Sabotage," which described the deadening subordination of workers to machines until, in the course of rebellion, the workers came to life

6. "The Doctrine of the Rights of Man as Formulated by Thomas Paine," in *The Radical Will*, ed. Olaf Hansen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 233–247.

7. "The History of a Literary Radical," in *War and the Intellectuals*, 191.

8. Filler, 141, n. 33.

9. Quotations in Filler, 48, 51.

and restored their primacy over matter. Columbia professor Carl Van Doren recalled Bourne reciting "Sabotage" before the Columbia literary society, which thought it no fit subject for a poem.¹⁰ This and other implicit defenses of class war and property destruction in certain instances, including the Soviet revolution in Russia, suggest that "pacifist" is not an exact description for Bourne's philosophy, though he sometimes used that word to describe opponents of the First World War. Violence was for him a last resort, but it was not ruled out categorically.

Bourne identified with the exploited and oppressed not as a result of sentimentality but on the basis of direct experience arising from his physical disability and work history. His face and body disfigured at birth, Bourne struggled from an early age against the stigma of the handicapped, a process he later credited as the wellspring of his "profound sympathy for all who are despised and ignored in the world."¹¹ His conversion to socialism, indeed, came during a conversation in the basement of the New York Public Library with a man in a wheelchair.¹² Although accepted by Princeton upon graduation from high school in Bloomfield, New Jersey, in 1903, Bourne instead was compelled to work for six years. The reasons remain obscure, but may possibly be connected to his family's abandonment by his father. His first job was for a manufacturer of perforated music rolls for player pianos who slashed Bourne's piece-rate wages once he became skilled.¹³ When that business failed, Bourne spent two long, unsuccessful years in New York without secure employment, spurned for his looks, barely eking out a living by giving music lessons in what he later called "the repeated failure even to obtain a chance to fail, the realization that those at home can ill afford to have you idle, the growing dread of encountering people."¹⁴

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10. Filler, 42; Bourne, "Sabotage" (1913), in *The Radical Will*, ed. Olaf Hansen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 90–92.
 11. "The Handicapped" (1911), in *The World of Randolph Bourne*, ed. Lillian Schlissel (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1965), 79.
 12. For an assessment of disability and Bourne that sets a new standard and transforms Bourne analysis, see Paul K. Longmore and Paul Steven Miller, "'A Philosophy of Handicap': The Origins of Randolph Bourne's Radicalism," *Radical History Review*, no. 94 (2006), 59–83.
 13. He used the experience of his own exploitation at the hands of this employer as an example revealing the plight of the whole working class in "What is Exploitation?" (1916), in *War and the Intellectuals*.
 14. From *Youth and Life* (1913), quoted by Filler, 18. He also told of this experience in "The Handicapped" (1911).

No wonder that Bourne was unusually sensitive to the exploitation and alienation of labor and the desperation and shame of the unemployed. Bourne condemned Columbia University for the poor wages it paid its scrub women, but for him better wages, while necessary, were insufficient, because exploitation was inherent in class relations. He witnessed "with my own eyes in Scranton and Gary and Pittsburgh the way workers live, not in crises of industrial war but in brimming times of peace."¹⁵ He characterized anti-trust initiatives as "absurd," for corporate rule would not be affected by liberal reform.¹⁶ Common ownership and a stateless society, he held, were necessary to disposing of surplus value justly: "As long . . . as the employer is entrenched in property rights with the armed state behind him, the power will be his, and the class that does the diverting will not be labor."¹⁷

It has often been said that Bourne's radicalism was not precisely Marxist, but it is more accurate to say that his radicalism was syncretic and heterodox, drawing freely upon revolutionary Marxist theory just as it was sustained by left-wing Deweyan pragmatism and Whitmanesque democracy. Bourne was estranged from most liberals and many social democrats, including those at his erstwhile vehicle, the *New Republic*, as a result of his principled and sharp criticism of them for throwing their support to the First World War. By the end of the war, when Bourne was isolated and hounded and penniless, practically the only hope and inspiration he drew was from the newborn revolution in Russia. Critics of the First World War, he wrote, "are skeptical of this war professedly for political democracy, because at home they have seen so little democracy where industrial slaves are rampant. They see the inspiring struggle in the international class struggle, not in the struggles of imperialist nations. To Russia, the socialist state, not to America who has taken a place on old ground - do they look for realization of their ideal."¹⁸

That concluding sentence, of course, was uttered at the beginning of a century in which socialists would see their idealism shattered by developments in the Soviet Union. How would this early enthusiasm have played out across the 20th century? Bourne's heterodox socialism and valuation of personal expression could not be easily squared with Stalinism. It is unlikely that he would have traded the pressure to conform that he so resented in family and polite opinion for a

15. "What is Exploitation?" (1916) (note 13), 134.

16. As quoted in Filler, 14.

17. "What is Exploitation?" 137.

18. Filler, 114-115.

debased version of radical politics as martial discipline and dogma. His syndicalist musings suggest that that he would have sided with working-class uprisings against the bureaucratic Communist states such as in Hungary in 1956 or Poland in 1980–1981 – and would likewise have resisted the neoliberal market rapture that followed upon the collapse of those regimes in 1989. All of that is, however, speculation, and impossible to determine because of Bourne's death at age 32 in the 1818 influenza epidemic spawned by the war he opposed. We can say with assurance that Bourne's radicalism was unorthodox and iconoclastic, as one might imagine in someone whose course of radical study started with the single-taxer Henry George.¹⁹

One of Bourne's most important radical insights came when defining the relationship of intellectuals to social movements. In warning against an "intellectual radicalism . . . afraid to be itself," Bourne insisted upon uncompromisingly critical thought: "Intellectual radicalism should not mean repeating stale dogmas of Marxism. It should not mean 'the study of socialism.' It had better mean a restless, controversial criticism of current ideas, and a hammering out of some clear-sighted philosophy that shall be this pillar of fire."²⁰ This passage may have been inspired by the negative example of the Socialist Labor Party to which he had been exposed by Harry Chase, or by the orthodox social democrats present in the Socialist Party of America, who recited Marx in letter while acting as reformists in practice. Both were likely to have seemed barren to Bourne, guided as he was by the experimental ethic essential to pragmatism in its philosophical, rather than vernacular, expression.

In the course of this rousing exposition on the merit of both relentless intellectual independence *and* ardent commitment to labor and socialism, Bourne drew, however, a disconcerting conclusion:

The only way by which middle-class radicalism can serve is by being fiercely and concentratedly intellectual . . . The labor movement in this country needs a philosophy, a literature, a constructive socialist analysis and criticism of industrial relations . . . Labor will scarcely do this thinking for itself.²¹

"Labor will scarcely do this thinking for itself": Bourne's unconscious replication of class society's bifurcation of labor and thought, so at odds with the rest of his oeuvre, carried no small danger of elitism. Bourne was astute to counsel intellectuals to reject dogma, to be

19. "The Handicapped" (1911) (note 11), 23.

20. "The Price of Radicalism" (1916), in *War and the Intellectuals*, 140.

21. *Ibid.*

ready to quarrel and ask uncomfortable questions, to remain ever open to new experience, and never to suspend their critical faculties. But his celebration of intellectual malcontents was marred by this moment of condescension toward the very underdog classes whose cause he considered his own. Bourne, despite his admiration for the revolutionary proletariat, failed here to consider the accumulated insights of rank-and-file workers as one of the experiences to which intellectuals must remain open.²²

This invites another uncertain speculation. The "revolutionary proletariat" was in Bourne's judgment the most consistent resister of the state. Would Bourne have remained committed to the labor movement once it turned more conservative in the latter half of the 20th century? In the decades after the Second World War, many intellectuals came to think that the "labor question" did not have the same centrality as a social issue as it did between 1877 and 1945. Not only was the labor movement quiescent, but during the Cold War, Vietnam War, and subsequent engagements a sizeable section of the US working class, including the union officialdom, lent support to military interventions by the US state and evinced conservatism on a number of social issues, such as racial justice. This surely would have required Bourne to rethink his positioning of workers as the most likely source of resistance to patriotic state worship.

On the whole, nevertheless, Bourne's imagination was profoundly democratic, seeking renewal from below. In his unfinished essay on "The State," he distinguished poetically between three principal political agents: the people, or *nation*; the innocuous, routine *government*; and the *State*, a militaristic, repressive, belligerent, coercive instrument of the ruling class. He favored the nation against the State, for the State, in his view, thwarted the people. This essay, written almost simultaneously to (and in ignorance of) Lenin's *State and Revolution* (1917), used a different vocabulary, one that therefore might not be considered "scientific" by Marxists only a short while later. His analysis, however, was not without its compatibilities with Lenin's revolutionary objection to the state because of its class character. Bourne, moreover, was no mystic of "the people." He insightfully identified a "herd instinct" of state worship rooted in the very same "gregarious impulse" that inspires social solidarity.²³

Bringing Bourne's eclectic left-wing socialism back into focus is not only important to restoring his politics; it is also essential to our

22. "The State," 77-78.

23. "The State," *passim*.

understanding of his cultural project. It is, for example, fruitful to read "Trans-National America" and its ideal of a "weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors" as an echo of the longstanding socialist ideal of international solidarity forsaken in Europe's rush to war.²⁴ Despite the essay's disappointing failure to address race, that paramount problem in American life, Bourne's ringing salute to cosmopolitan democracy as the antidote to bigotry makes his essay now seem not only a celebration of American heterogeneity but a model for imagining alternatives to ethnoracial conflicts inside nations the world over, such as those between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, Sudanese Muslims and black Africans, Russians and Chechens, French citizens and Arab immigrants, or Germans and Turks.

Likewise, Bourne's criticism of the university was not solely on educational grounds (the dry lecture system, elevation of sports over scholarship, the lifeless canon) or even narrowly political grounds (Columbia's dismissal of two professors critical of the First World War). Bourne's objection was a systemic one of antipathy to capitalism's distortion of learning. Bourne was one of the first to object to the transformation of the university into "a private commercial corporation" producing "the academic commodity" under the control of trustees drawn from the ruling class. His "ideal solution" was public ownership of the universities, "with control vested in the 'guild' of professors."²⁵

Even his famous war essays were illuminated by a public-minded, socialist vision placing socialization above capitalism and egoistic individualism, as when, in "A Moral Equivalent for Universal Military Service" (1916), Bourne proposed, instead of a military draft, that young Americans undergo a mandatory phase of public service in health, conservation, agriculture, regulatory inspection, and childrearing - a social alternative to military "preparedness."²⁶ Here, as in his educational theory, we can see that it is an error to claim Bourne for anarchism or libertarianism. Notwithstanding his urge to overthrow the State, he often suggested policy solutions, underscoring the importance of his distinction between state and government. A policy of universal social obligation that would seem statist and

24. "Trans-National America," in *War and the Intellectuals*, 121.

25. "The Idea of a University" (1917), in *War and the Intellectuals*, 152-155.

26. "A Moral Equivalent for Universal Military Service," one of Bourne's best-known essays, was originally published in the *New Republic*, but is available in many collections, including *War and the Intellectuals*, 142-147.

coercive to anarchists was acceptable to Bourne by virtue of his public outlook and the policy's merely temporary duration in the life of young people.

Again, the point is not that there is a political "side" of Bourne that ought to be emphasized. The point is that his thought cannot be compartmentalized - literary here, political there. Bourne's lyricism and social philosophy place him in a tradition of writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and George Orwell who, no matter how great their cultural attainments, would not have wanted their political contributions belittled or their stylistic virtuosity constricted to overly narrow classifications of "cultural radicalism."

Both the Greenwich Village atmosphere of youthful experimentation and revolt *and* the worldwide workers' rebellion that exploded toward the end of the second decade of the 20th century were implicit in Bourne's refusal to put his finger to the wind before speaking fresh and vital truths. Idealism, aestheticism, feminism, friendship, music, reading, and impassioned discussion were for Bourne *social* ideals, as reflected in his judgment that all great art was ethical, imbued with religion and politics. When we recapture the Bourne who emphasized "social consciousness," "human progress," and "the bringing of a fuller, richer life to more people on this earth" as against "that poisonous counsel of timidity and distrust of human ideals which pours out in steady stream from reactionary press and pulpit" - words that still have bite in our own epoch of Fox News and greed-condoning mega-churches - then we will have gone some way toward ensuring that the ghost of Bourne still giggles down our streets.²⁷

27. The allusion here is to John Dos Passos's well known invocation of Bourne as a ghost who still giggles down the cobblestone streets of Greenwich Village. The quotations are from "The Handicapped," 81-82.